



# Psychology of a Crisis

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# Module Summary

- Common negative feelings and behaviors for people during a crisis
- How communication differs in a crisis
- Risk communication principles for emergencies

# Psychology of a Crisis

Common human emotions—  
left without mitigating response—  
may lead to negative behaviors  
that hamper recovery or cause  
more harm.

# Negative Behaviors

- Demands for unneeded treatment
- Reliance on special relationships
- Unreasonable trade and travel restrictions
- MUPS—Multiple Unexplained Physical Symptoms

# What Do People Feel Inside When a Disaster Occurs or Looms?

- Denial
- Fear and avoidance
- Hopelessness or helplessness
- Vicarious rehearsal
- Seldom panic

# What Is Vicarious Rehearsal?

- The communication age gives national audiences the experience of local crises. These armchair victims mentally rehearse recommended courses of actions.
- Recommendations are easier to reject the farther removed the audience is from real threat.
- The worried well can heavily tax response and recovery.

# What's Different During a Crisis?

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# Communicating in a Crisis Is Different

When in “fight or flight” moments of an emergency, more information leads to decreased anxiety.



# Decisionmaking in a Crisis Is Different

- People simplify
- Cling to current beliefs
- We remember what we see or previously experience (first messages carry more weight)

# So How Do We Initially Communicate in a Crisis?

**S**imply

**T**imely

**A**ccurately

**R**epeatedly

**C**redibly

**C**onsistently

# How Do We Communicate About Risk in an Emergency?

**All risks are not accepted equally**

- Voluntary vs. involuntary
- Controlled personally vs. controlled by others
- Familiar vs. exotic
- Natural vs. manmade
- Reversible vs. permanent
- Statistical vs. anecdotal
- Fairly vs. unfairly distributed
- Affecting children vs. affecting adults



# Be Careful With Risk Comparisons

- Are they similarly accepted based on
  - high/low hazard
  - high/low outrage

A. High hazard	B. High outrage
C. Low hazard	D. Low outrage

- Give examples
- Cornerstone of risk acceptance



# Risk Acceptance Examples

- Dying by falling coconut or dying by shark
  - Natural vs. manmade
  - Fairly vs. unfairly distributed
  - Familiar vs. exotic
  - Controlled by self vs. outside control of self

# RISK Communication

## Principles for Emergencies

### Don't overreassure

- Considered controversial by some.
- A high estimate of harm modified downward is much more acceptable to the public than a low estimate of harm modified upward.



# **RISK Communication**

## **Principles for Emergencies**

**State continued concern before stating  
reassuring updates**

“Although we’re not out of the woods yet,  
we have seen a declining number of cases  
each day this week.”





# RISK Communication

## Principles for Emergencies

### Confidence vs. uncertainty

Instead of making promises about outcomes, express the uncertainty of the situation and a confident belief in the “process” to fix the problem and address public safety concerns.



# **RISK Communication**

## **Principles for Emergencies**

**Give people things to do - Anxiety is reduced by action and a restored sense of control**

- Symbolic behaviors (e.g., going to a candlelight vigil)
- Preparatory behaviors (e.g., buying water and batteries)
- Contingent “if, then” behaviors (e.g., creating an emergency family communication plan)



# **RISK Communication**

## **Principles for Emergencies**

**Give people things to do - Anxiety is reduced by action and a restored sense of control**

- Single most important action for self-protection
- Recommend a 3-part action plan
  - You must do X
  - You should do Y
  - You can do Z



# **RISK Communication**

## **Principles for Emergencies**

**Allow people the right to feel fear**

- Don't pretend they're not afraid, and don't tell them they shouldn't be.
- Acknowledge the fear, and give contextual information.

